

# Save the Movie!



Images courtesy Warner Bros, Disney/Pixar, Disney, and Universal Pictures

If you've gone to the movies recently, you may have felt a strangely familiar feeling: You've seen this movie before. Not this *exact* movie, but some of these exact story beats: the hero dressed down by his mentor in the first 15 minutes (***Star Trek Into Darkness, Battleship***); the villain who gets caught on purpose (***The Dark Knight, The Avengers, Skyfall, Star Trek Into Darkness***); the moment of hopelessness and disarray a half-hour before the movie ends (***Olympus Has Fallen, Oblivion, 21 Jump Street, Fast & Furious 6***).

It's not déjà vu. Summer movies are often described as formulaic. But what few people know is that there is *actually a formula*—one that lays out, on a page-by-page basis, exactly what should happen when in a screenplay. It's as if a mad scientist has discovered a secret process for making a perfect, or at least perfectly conventional, summer blockbuster.

The formula didn't come from a mad scientist. Instead it came from a screenplay guidebook, ***Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need***. In the book, author Blake Snyder, a **successful spec screenwriter** who became an influential screenplay guru, preaches a variant on the basic three-act structure that has dominated blockbuster filmmaking since the late 1970s.

When Snyder published his book in 2005, it was as if an explosion ripped through Hollywood. The book offered something previous screenplay guru tomes didn't. Instead of a broad overview of how a screen story fits together, his book broke down the three-act structure into a detailed “beat sheet”: 15 key story “beats”—pivotal events that have to happen—and then gave each of those beats a name and a screenplay page number. Given that each page of a screenplay is expected to equal a minute of film, this makes Snyder's guide essentially a minute-to-minute movie formula.

Snyder, who died in 2009, would almost certainly dispute this characterization. In *Save the Cat!*, he stresses that his beat sheet is a *structure*, not a formula, one based in time-tested screen-story principles. It's a way of making a product that's likely to work—not a fill-in-the-blanks method of screenwriting.

Maybe that's what Snyder intended. But that's not how it turned out. In practice, Snyder's beat sheet has taken over Hollywood screenwriting. Movies big and small stick closely to his beats and page counts. Intentionally or not, it's become a formula—a formula that threatens the world of original screenwriting as we know it.

Screenplay gurus like Syd Field and Robert McKee touted the essential virtues of **three-act structure** for decades. For Field and McKee, three-act structure is more of an organizing principle—a way of understanding the shape of a story. Field's **Story Paradigm**, for example, has just a handful of general elements attached to broad page ranges.

Field and McKee offered the screenwriter's equivalent of cooking tips from your grandmother—general tips and tricks to guide your process. Snyder, on the other hand, offers a detailed recipe with step-by-step instructions.

Each of the 15 beats is attached to a specific page number or set of pages. And Snyder makes it clear that each of these moments is a must-have in a well-structured screenplay. The page counts don't need to be followed strictly, Snyder says, but it's important to get the proportions fairly close. You can see the complete beat sheet, with page numbers and a summary of each beat, **in a sidebar here**.

Let's take a journey through this year's blockbusters and blockbuster wannabes and see the big trailer-ready ways in which Snyder's beat sheet pops up over and over again. Look at January's **Gangster Squad**. After an opening image that sets up the conflict between Josh Brolin's hard-charging cop, Sgt. John O'Mara, and the criminal forces of mob boss Mickey Cohen

(Sean Penn), O'Mara is called in to see his gruff police superior. "We got rules around here, smartass," the chief growls. "Do yourself a favor. Learn 'em." That's Snyder's second beat, **theme stated**. And it's right at the seven-minute mark, almost exactly when it's supposed to happen in a 110-minute movie. The rest of the Snyder playbook is there, too: a story-starting **catalyst** midway through the first act, a shootout at the **midpoint** that ups the ante, an **all-is-lost moment**—including a death—between the 75- and 80-minute mark, and a concluding **final act** in which the baddies are dispatched in ranking order, just as Snyder instructs.

Or look at March's *Jack the Giant Slayer*. There's an **opening image** that sets up each of the young protagonists' problems and **states the theme** at the five-minute mark, a **catalyst** at the 12-minute mark, an **act break** between the 25- and 30-minute mark when Jack climbs the beanstalk, and a **false victory** 90 minutes in, when it looks as if the evil giants have been definitively defeated.